

Glossary for Planning Academy

Boards, Commissions and Review Panels

Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals (BMZA): This board hears and determines all zoning appeals, basing its decisions on what will promote the health, security, morals, and general welfare of the community. The BMZA is primarily responsible for approving variances, conditional uses, and non-conforming uses. Unlike the Planning Commission, the BMZA does not work to develop citywide planning policies. Rather it serves as a body for making individual zoning decisions, based on the directives handed down to it from the City Charter and the zoning code. It has more of a focus on specific technical details of particular projects.

Planning Commission: The Planning Commission dates back to a revision of the City Charter in 1947. At that time, the Charter stipulated that the Commission would be a nine-member board composed of: six citizens appointed by the Mayor, the Director of the Department of Public Works or his designee, a member of the City Council, and the Mayor or his representative. Key responsibilities include preparing and updating plans tied to the growth and physical development of Baltimore City; developing a capital budget program; developing and maintaining a Comprehensive Master Plan; reviewing proposals for the subdivision of land; and reviewing amendments to the City's Zoning Ordinance. The Planning Commission relies on the staff of the Department of Planning to accomplish this work.

Site Plan Review Committee: This is an inter-agency group of representatives of Baltimore City agencies that approve development.

Urban Design and Architectural Review Panel (UDARP): This is a panel of professional architects who study the design of new or renovated buildings and recommend design improvements to a development team. The UDAAP advises the Planning Director on the architectural appropriateness of proposed development.

Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP): Established in 1964, this group reviews all development in designated Historic Districts and must approve all demolitions in Historic Districts. CHAP also recommends the creation of new local Historic Districts to the Mayor and City Council, which must approve them by ordinance.

Common Terminology

Bulk Bulk regulations are the combination of controls (lot size, floor area ratio, lot coverage, open space, yards, height and setback) that determine the maximum size and allowable placement of a building on a zoning lot.

By-right Development

An as-of-right development complies with all applicable zoning regulations and does not require any discretionary action by the Planning Commission or BMZA.

Conditional Uses A conditional use is a land use that must be considered and approved by either the BMZA or the City Council. The consideration by the BMZA or City Council must include the impact on neighboring properties, the public need for the use, and a list of 13 factors as outlined in the Code (including the proximity to dwellings, the preservation of historical landmarks, and the provisions of any applicable Urban Renewal Plan). A property owner must submit a written and graphic application for a conditional use and appear before the granting body. Additionally, the grantor may impose certain conditions on the conditional use when approving it.

Density The average number of individual or building units within a given space or lot.

Development Rights

Development rights generally refer to the maximum amount of floor area permissible on a zoning lot. When the actual built floor area is less than the maximum permitted floor area, the difference is referred to as “unused development rights.”

Exceptions In certain situations, the Zoning Code allows uses and physical layouts that are not expressly permitted by right. These exceptions are generally known as nonconformance, conditional uses, and variances

Floor Area Ratio (FAR) The floor area ratio is a bulk regulation controlling the size of buildings. FAR is the ratio of total building floor area to the area of its zoning lot.

Parcel A tract or plot of land; a lot of record

Planned Unit Development A planned unit development (PUD) allows a development to combine use regulations from several zoning districts into a single zoning district. The purpose of a PUD is to allow for uses (or a combination of uses) that would not

otherwise be allowed in a certain zoning district. In granting these exceptions, the PUD should demonstrate a substantial benefit to the city.

Permitted Use A use allowed in the zoning district

Setback Distance of a structure from the nearest property line

Variances An administrative exception to a zoning or land use regulation. A variance may be granted to address a variety of situations, including a reduction of the minimum lot area required for a property, a lessening of setbacks, an increase in floor area ratio and/or height, and an adjustment of the number of parking spaces required for a development. In order to obtain a variance, the property owner must appear at a public hearing in front of the BMZA or, in limited circumstances, the City Council.

Zoning Districts: parts of a complete map of the city that show which areas or lots are zoned a certain way.